

The Scientific Connection Between ACEs and Resilience

Have you ever noticed that children can learn new things with exceptional ease? That is because their brains are in constant, rapid development. The human brain continues developing late into adult life, but **the great majority of brain development takes place during the first 5 years of life.** Nerve arrangements in the brain are much more easily changed during childhood, and they develop in a “use it or lose it” fashion dependent on the child’s sensory experiences. **It is possible to “rewire” the brain at any age, but it is easiest in childhood.**

Each time a child has a sensory experience, a connection in the brain is formed to process it. Deeper, long-lasting connections are made when a particular experience happens over and over. The younger a child is when they have an experience, the larger the area of the brain designated to process those experiences. For example, children who learn instruments at an early age will have a larger area of their brain devoted to playing that instrument than someone who starts playing during adolescence, even if the adolescent spends more time practicing.

Studies that highlight childhood sensory experience and

development conclude that enriching experiences can enhance development, while adverse experiences can deter it, and lead to long term health problems. Fortunately, there is a way that children and even adults can heal from adverse experiences, and that is where **resilience** comes in.

When talking about resilience, it’s important to understand the variety of stresses individuals experience and the context in which they experience them. How the body handles stress is similar to how the body handles sickness. When the immune system encounters small colds and illnesses it builds antibodies and defenses so that next time it encounters similar germs it can attack them faster, and the body won’t even get sick.

Similarly, some exposure to **stress can promote resilience**, but if stress exceeds a person’s ability to manage stress it can be toxic and lead to negative health outcomes. Resilience raises the stress threshold, allowing individuals to handle a greater amount of stress before it becomes toxic, therefore further building resilience, and the cycle continues. Anyone can learn simple skills and tools to deal with stress as part of becoming more resilient.

SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS ARE VITAL TO BREAKING THE CYCLE

80% of brain growth happens in the first three years of life, and a child’s brain develops best through social interaction.

Research shows that supportive relationships increase a person’s ability to thrive and allow for normal, healthy brain development.

Healthy brain development establishes a good foundation for future health, intellect, and resilience, allowing a child to reach their full potential.

Healthy brains are better able to form caring relationships.

Caring relationships connect a community. Better connected communities have lower levels of crime, violence and trauma, and community members have a better sense of well-being.

Communities can promote healthy brain development through building relationships.

A community built on caring relationships protects children from the effects of tough times.

CONNECTION

Between ACEs and Resilience

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

Resilience is how well an individual or group can withstand and recover from significant changes that threaten their stability, capability, or development.

WHAT ARE ACEs?

ACEs are defined as ongoing traumatic events that occur during childhood—everything from abuse or neglect, to growing up with a family member who is incarcerated in the household. ACEs cause toxic stress, which can affect a child’s brain development.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Resilience is a major factor in the growth and development of children and adolescents. Building strong resilience counters the harmful health effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).



Learn more at:
www.skp-resilience.mappofskp.net
skp.resilience@gmail.com

TYPES OF ACEs

NEGLECT

- Emotional
- Physical

ABUSE

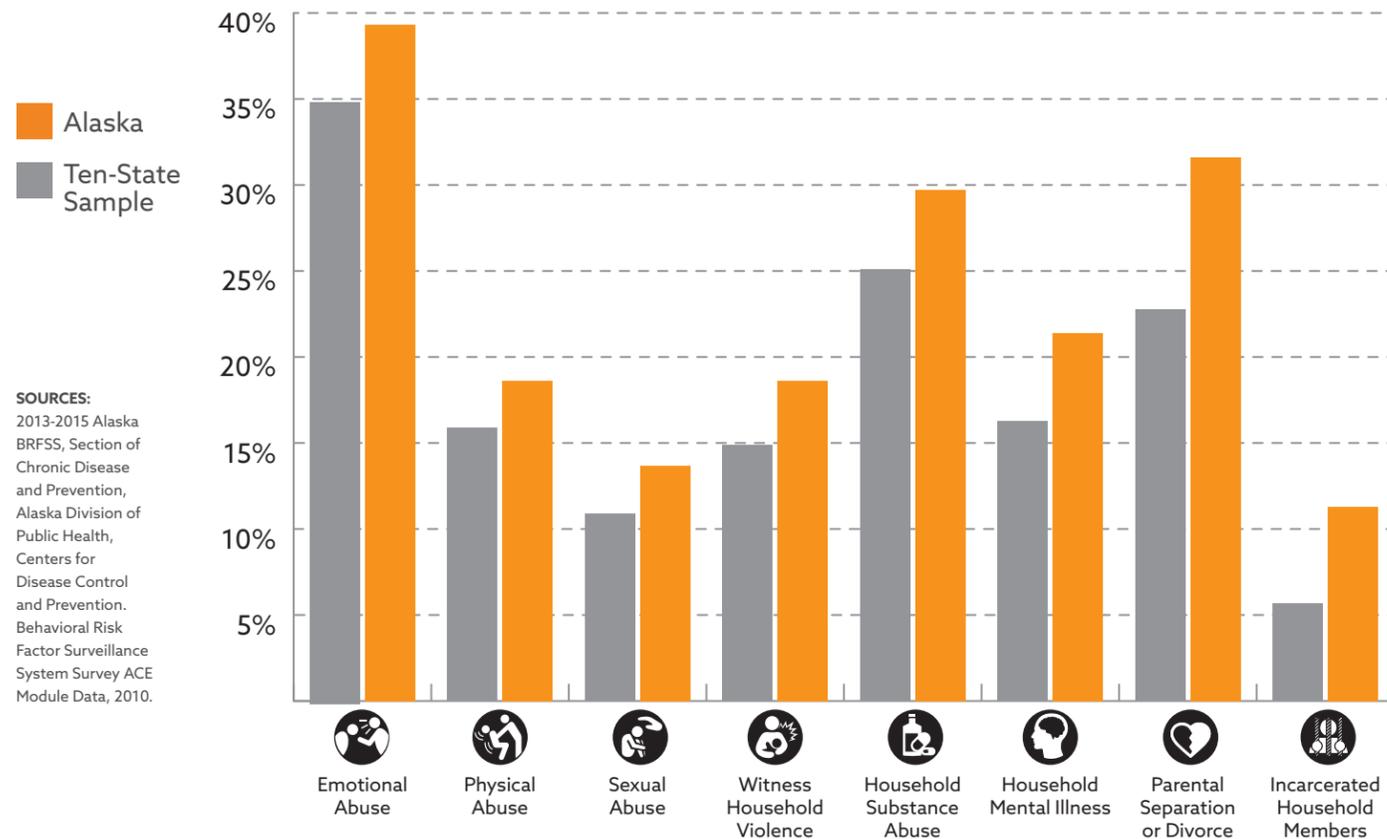
- Physical
- Sexual
- Emotional

HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION

- Household Substance Abuse
- Parental Divorce
- Household Mental Illness
- Incarcerated Household Member
- Witness household violence

One important way a medical provider can help foster positive relationships between caregivers and children is to support adults in their own self-care.

PERCENTAGE OF ALASKA ADULTS' ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES COMPARED TO A TEN STATE SAMPLE



Facts and Figures

OVER 64% OF ALASKAN ADULTS have had one or more adverse childhood experiences.

When comparing Alaska to average results from ten states, a greater percentage of adult Alaskans have had every type of adverse childhood experience (ACE) that was surveyed.

ACEs are typically passed down from generation to generation. A child of a parent who has experienced tough times is more likely to face tough times themselves.

People all deal with tough times differently depending on their experiences, relationships, and community. Experiencing too much trauma without relief can change the brain and body, leading to poor health and social outcomes.

Children ages 0-5 are especially affected by tough times as their brain is going through rapid development. The good news is they can also rapidly learn how to handle tough times when they have the example of a caring, supportive adult. Brains continue to develop throughout life, so everyone can learn new skills to handle tough times.

Samantha rushed into the waiting room with her 4 year-old, Alex, who had an appointment that day. "I'm so sorry," she gasped as she approached the check in counter, "I can't seem to be on time to anything anymore, I have so much going on right now, I can't even get my own child to the doctor!"

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

The framework for a child to build resilience along with good mental and physical health starts with their parent/caregivers having a good sense of wellbeing and self-care skills. This provides positive role-modeling for children, and supports caregivers forming a supportive, safe, and secure relationship with their child. Everyone faces a variety of stressors in their lives that can become overwhelming. As a medical provider, you can remind caregivers of the relationship between them taking care of themselves and their ability to better take care of their child. You are in a position to help foster positive parent-child relationships by assessing the caregiver's stress level and health status. Providing support and encouragement, assisting caregivers in accessing resources to help with stress management, problem solving, and coping strategies, and addressing mental health concerns with referrals to appropriate services are all things you can do.

PROVIDE SOCIAL SUPPORT:

Assess the caregiver's behavior and stress level. Ask them how they are doing and listen closely to what the parent has to say. Be aware of opportunities for parents to develop positive social interactions, whether that be parenting groups around the community, or parenting classes that your medical group provides or has access to. These opportunities allow parents to expand their social network and develop supportive relationships. Be alert to parents who may be isolated or depressed and be available when they need to reach out. Refer parents to a social worker when issues need to be addressed.

PROVIDE KNOWLEDGE ON PARENTING AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT:

Parents who understand child development have more realistic expectations

of their children based on their developmental stage. Remind caregivers that the experiences children have in the first 5 years of life affect their health and behavior later in life. Children who have previously faced trauma will need a different style of parenting and may require complementary mental health specialists to meet their needs. Make referrals to these professionals as necessary.

HELP PARENTS UNDERSTAND THAT THEIR CHILD'S WELL-BEING IS DEPENDENT ON THEIR OWN WELL-BEING:

Younger children are typically not able to put oral directions into practice, rather they instinctively mimic behaviors and actions seen around them. Discuss with caregivers that their own ability to deal with stress and adversity is what their children will model when faced

with challenges. Parenting is difficult and raising a child does not put the rest of life on hold. There are still many daily difficulties that parents deal with and it can be overwhelming; remind caregivers this is normal. Encourage parents to take care of themselves and explain that it isn't selfish but actually pertinent for their child's well-being. Suggest the parent(s) write down their self-care strategies as a reminder to take time for themselves each day. Ask them to describe situations they find stressful and help them develop a plan for how to keep themselves calm and balanced under these circumstances.

